

SHOWCASE

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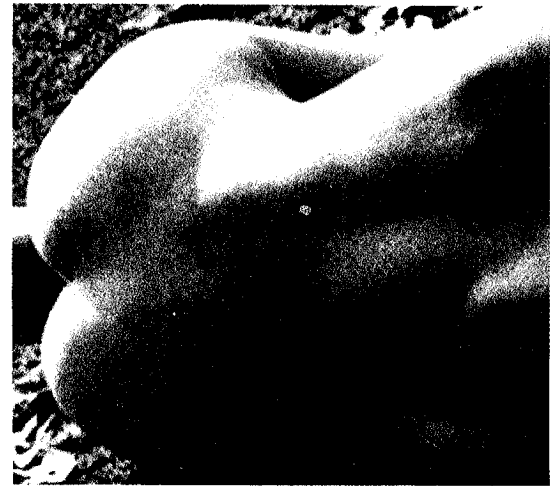
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14 beds

Fiction by Jack Ritchie

**GARY WOULD GLADLY
DO IT — STRICTLY FOR
THE SURVIVAL OF THE
SPECIES, OF COURSE
— BUT HIS WIFE DIDN'T
FEEL PHILANTHROPIC
ENOUGH TO LET HIM
SACRIFICE HIMSELF TO
THE STARVING HORDE.**



ILLUSTRATED BY COL. SEBASTIAN MORAN

THERE WERE FOUR BLONDES on the jury, six brunettes, and two redheads. A more eager and prejudiced collection of college girls would have been difficult to assemble.

Correction. Utterly impossible.

They sat in two lines of straight-back chairs at one end of the huge living room, shotguns and rifles on their laps, and waited for the trial to begin.

"Your Honor," I said. "What is the specific charge against my wife?"

Madge Regan, green eyes and oh, . . . about 125 pounds, I'd say . . . rested her chin on the gavel head. "What have you decided on, Madam Prosecutor?" she asked briskly.

Doris Winters, a brunette with aggressive hormones, leaned forward, her fingertips on the table. "Violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, your Honor. Mrs. Tracy has an absolute monopoly. She's threatening the continuation of the entire human race with her narrow-minded attitude. After all, now there are only seventeen of us left in the world. Fifteen women, one man, and Mr. Penrose."

Penrose sighed. "Believe me girls, I'd like to help, but I'm seventy-eight."

"Besides the survival of mankind," Doris continued, "There is something else we must consider." She blushed slightly. "Our emotional health. We are all nubile."

Eunice Kellog's sky-blue eyes sparkled in-



dignation. "Doris, what a nasty thing to say. Our thoughts are perfectly normal and clean."

"Dear," Madge Regan said soothingly. "Nubile means marriageable."

Eunice broke into a bright smile and sat down. "Well, we learn something every day, don't we?"

"Looking around this room," my wife Helen said stiffly, "I see no particularly good reason why the human race should continue. The results obviously haven't been too good so far."

"That is an anti-social attitude," Doris said. "Probably engendered by emotional insecurity."

"If the human race remains in business,"

Helen said heatedly, "I personally will be the only one responsible."

"My dear Mrs. Tracy," Madge Regan said. "Suppose you have all girls? Or all boys? Or even if there are some of each, don't you realize the possible consequences? You've heard of the Jukes, haven't you? Inbreeding emphasizes the bad characteristics as well as the good."

"This is *my* husband," Helen declared emphatically. "And what's more he's going to remain *my* husband alone."

"Dear," I said. "Don't excite yourself."

"I'd like to point out," my wife said evenly, "that every member of the jury is under age."

Emerald Finnister, languorous-limbed, got up. "I wouldn't say that, Mrs. Tracy. Why, in the part of the country where I come from we're sometimes as young as fourteen when we first . . ." She stopped. "Oh, you mean for jury duty?"

Madge Regan had a slow smile. "Would you just as soon waive a jury trial, Mrs. Tracy, and let me weigh the evidence and deliver a verdict?"

The idea definitely did not appeal to Helen. "I'd also like to point out that you're no judge," she said. "Just an instructor in a girl's college."

"Assistant Professor," Madge corrected. "The trial will begin."

"I demand a different judge and jury," Helen snapped.

"Honey," I pointed out. "All the people in the world are in this room. There are no other judges or juries."

She glared at me. "You're no big help. You just sit there with a smirk on your face."

"I have deliberately not been smirking," I said defensively. "I'm merely being calm. One must keep a cool head at a time like this."

"Doris," Madge Regan said. "Present your case to the jury."

"Yes, your Honor." Doris took a position in front of the two rows of chairs. "Ladies of the jury, let me take you back to the afternoon of June the 5th."

JUNE THE 5TH had started as a normal warm Sunday. Helen and I had taken an afternoon ride into the country and at two o'clock we had stopped at a small hillside town for some sandwiches.

And that was where we first saw Madge Regan and her thirteen chattering college girls.

Helen sipped her coffee and eavesdropped on their conversation. "They're college girls on some kind of an excursion."

I nodded and tried my sandwich.

"They're with their professor or instructor, or something like that," Helen said after a few more minutes.

I looked the girls over once again. "Where is he?"

"It's a she, dear. That older woman. Regan appears to be her name."

The older woman, as my wife put it, seemed to be in her late twenties. She had raven-black hair and she smiled faintly as our eyes caught for a moment.

"We used to do things like that in college too," Helen said. "Visit pulp mills and factories and things like that. To broaden our viewpoint. And besides it was something to do on Sunday afternoons. There wasn't a boys' school within fifty miles."

The door of the restaurant opened and Mr. Penrose came into our lives.

He had thin gray hair and wore a uniform of

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beat & offbeat

In a magazine of this sort, an editorial is worthwhile only insofar as the editor has something worth saying — otherwise, it either becomes an unintentional catchall or a mass of words solely designed to fit an allotted space in the layout. This issue, it's intended to be a catchall, devoted to the beat and offbeat in books, movies and people.

For readers with a liking for hate-and-revenge motivations in their mystery-detective fare, the best written of the current crop seems to be **HUNTER AT LARGE** by Thomas B. Dewey (Simon and Schuster; Inner Sanctum; \$3.50). After a hard day, Police Detective Mickey Phillips' thoughts were of his home and his wife Kathy. But at home there had been a knock on the door, a blow on the head, and then watching, bound and gagged, as two men took a razor to his wife. There was no motive, nothing to go on, officially. So Phillips resigned from the force and began a long search, not only for his wife's killers, but for release from the memory of his helplessness at her death. Then he found Margarita. She offered release, but was she protecting the murderers? Mr. Dewey leads a tough, fast, tightly-and-well-written tour down some dark roads.

• First Lady Chatterley became respectable, now Henry Miller. The septegenarian sage of Big Sur, Calif., bids fair to make a fortune in his elder age off the autobiopornographical revelations he authored at forty. Banned for the better part of thirty years by U.S. Customs, **TROPIC OF CANCER** has at last become available in America. Even before official publication date 30,000 copies of this Anglo-Saxon classic had been snapped up by curious readers. A reported 60,000 unexpurgated copies (at \$7.50 per) have been purchased as this column goes to press. In 1953 the Supreme Court of California condemned this work as not merely obscene but *rank* obscenity; we would call it an illy-constructed and poorly-written ramble, made "significant" not by its four-letter words, but by the legalistic furore they engendered.

• A much-ballyhooed paperback trio (**THE SOUND OF HIS HORN, RINGSTONES, THE DOLLMAKER**, by Sarban, Ballantine, 35c) promises, if we swallow Kingsley Amis' introduction to the first, to deliver a highly literate fantasy. The introduction, at least, is literate enough, but his opinion of Sarban as a writer seems unjustified. The most that

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FOURTEEN BEDS (continued from page 4)

sorts, rather old and faded, and a cap that reminded one of a railroad conductor's.

He came to our table and spoke to me. "Professor Regan?"

"No," I said. "She's the one over there with the nice . . . with the nice striped dress."

He looked in her direction and then back at us. "You folks in the party too?"

"No. Just passing through town."

"Then you didn't plan on seeing the mine?"

"What mine?"

"The lead mine. We have a guided tour on Sunday afternoons when there's no work going on. I'm the guide." He glanced at the girls and winced slightly.

Helen smiled. "Do all those girls make you nervous?"

"They shouldn't, ma'am," Penrose said. "I'm seventy-eight and on Social Security." He looked at them uneasily. "Maybe it's my imagination, but they seem to generate a lot of heat."

He sighed. "Are you sure you folks don't want to join us? Only two bits a person. My bus is outside and the mine's only a mile from here."

Madge Regan was definitely studying me.

"No," I said quickly. "I guess I'd better not."

"Why don't we, Gary?" Helen asked. "It might be fun."

I returned to my sandwich. "It might be dangerous."

"Oh, come now, Gary," Helen said. "We've got the time."

And that was how Helen and I, Mr. Penrose, Assistant Professor Madge Regan, and thirteen college girls happened to be in the lead mine when it happened.

Somehow, somewhere, someplace in this world, some damn fool pressed the wrong button, threw the wrong switch, bumped against the wrong lever, or messed up a formula.

When we emerged from the mine that afternoon, I was the first to notice anything wrong. Looking down the hill into town I saw automobiles scattered all over the streets and sidewalks. Some had crashed into store fronts, parked cars, or into each other.

Penrose whistled. "Biggest accident I ever saw. Looks like everybody got in on it."

My eyes followed the main street to the highway beyond town. Cars littered both sides of the road, the ditches, the fields, and about half of them were overturned.

"We'd better get right down there and see if we can help," I said.

Helen put her hand on my arm. "Wait a minute, Gary. There aren't any people. I don't see a single soul."

The chattering of the girls faltered and then died. There was no sound on the hillside but the wind.



"Good lord, Madame! Somebody else's teethmarks!"



"Listen, I'm setting up this blind date, so don't get smart with me. Just tell me if your world thinks you're handsome."

Madge Regan finally spoke. "They must be inside the houses."

Helen shook her head. "Not all of them. That just couldn't be. Somebody ought to be out in the streets."

"It must be an Alert," Penrose said. "With everybody ordered inside."

"No," I said. "They'd at least take the time to park their cars."

We were silent another minute and then I made the first reluctant move. "We can't stay up here forever. Let's go."

Penrose drove us about half a mile and then stopped his bus beside a two-tone sedan rammed into a fence.

I got out and opened the right hand door of the car. A small heap of clothing was behind the wheel — as if the driver had stripped and fled. "Nothing," I said. "It's empty." I heard the sound of static and noticed that the radio was on. I slid inside the car, pushed the clothing aside and tried the selector knob. "All the stations are off the air."

The girls were staring wide-eyed out of the bus windows.

"Try those two Conelrad stations," Helen said. "If there really is an Alert, they're supposed to stay on the air."

"I already did," I said. "There's nothing on 640 or 1240 either."

I got out and felt the hood of the sedan. It was warm.

One of the girls giggled nervously. "Everything's so quiet."

We tried four more cars along the way and they were empty too.

Helen's voice trembled. "Did you notice, Gary? In every car. Little piles of clothing, and that gray dust. Just as if everybody suddenly turned . . ."

"Let's keep going," I said hurriedly.

AT THE EDGE of town we came to an impassible tangle of cars and had to get out and walk. The streets were littered with discarded clothing. Here and there, where the gear shift was in neutral, I noticed automobile motors still running. But there were no people inside the cars.

We tried the drugstores and then the taverns. There wasn't a sign of life. But there was that gray dust in neat little piles before the bars. And the constant litter of shirts, skirts, trousers, watches, cigarettes, etc.

I suggested that we break up and spread out to cover the entire town, but none of the girls would consider it. They huddled closely behind me wherever I went.

I tried the private homes next. At first I knocked and waited for an answer, but after a while I didn't bother.

In the basement of a large duplex off Main Street I found the ham rig.

Penrose studied it. "That's one of them radio transmitters and receivers?"

I sat down before it and tried phone and CW for half an hour, but raised nothing.

"You sure you know how to work that thing?" Penrose asked.

I nodded. "I have my ticket."

Madge Regan's voice was frightened. "You can't get anything in the whole country?"

"In the whole world," I said slowly.

Doris Winters gasped. "But the electricity is on. You used it for the radio." She pointed to the ceiling. "And the light is on. That means there must be other people *somewhere* near here."

I sighed. "The generators at the power plant are still working, but I don't think anybody's there either. They'll stop running in a day or two after the fuel runs out." I hesitated a moment and then cleared my throat. "I have the sneaking suspicion we're the only people left in the world."

That broke the dam and the hysterics began bouncing off the walls. The basement was no place for men, so Penrose and I left Helen and Madge Regan to do their best and fled upstairs.

I found a bottle of Bourbon and we went into the study and shut the door.

"Well," I said, and raised my glass, "Here's to the last two men in the world."

Penrose contemplated his drink for a moment. "Whatever happens from now on will be your worry. A game of checkers is my speed and even that leaves me winded."

It took us all about three days of drinking to adjust to the situation and then came the realization that everything in the world was ours — just for the taking.

For twenty-four hours I went around punching No Sale keys on cash registers. I knew that money was no good now, but I still had a fine time.

At the end of the week we decided to move on to a bigger place. We found the country roads fairly clear. But whenever we met a blocked highway and found we couldn't drive around the maze of smashed cars or move them, we simply abandoned our three car caravan, walked around the obstacle, selected usable cars beyond it, brushed the gray dust off the seats, and drove blithely on.

Whenever we needed gas we phoned it from cars along the way. I drove one beautiful Cadillac forty miles before a completely impassible intersection forced me to abandon it. I almost cried.

In Chicago the girls went on a spree. They broke into jewelry shops, department stores, and dress shops and took

what they wanted. I did fairly well myself — I go for good liquor and sporting equipment — and Penrose concentrated on fine cigars.

But after three weeks, the inconveniences of living in a dead city proved too much. The electric power was off, of course, and there were no other utilities. No gas, no water pressure, and travel inside the city had to be done by foot. Hardly a street was clear for more than twenty yards.

We left notes in every important place we could think of indicating our general direction of travel — on the off-chance that someone else might be alive in the world — and moved out into the country.

We shopped around and selected a colony of self-contained estates along the banks of a large river. Helen, Penrose, and I took up residence in an English Tudor and Madge Regan and the girls settled in an American Modern three hundred yards away.

We had oil heat, a private power plant, well and pump, and electric stoves. Penrose and I located an oil storage depot eight miles away that would keep us in fuel for a thousand years.

IT BECAME a rather pleasant life. I did a lot of fishing during the summer, on the off-chance that some of Earth's underwater inhabitants had escaped disintegration. It was a frail hope, at best, and it proved fruitless — or fishless. Undaunted, I switched to hunting when the air turned crisp. Mainly I used an over and under twelve-gauge while my wife preferred a .410 she found in the gun room of one of our neighboring estates. There were no living targets, of course, but we shot hell out of assorted bits of scenery. Again, there was always the chance that something else had survived.

I was a bit surprised at Helen's sudden interest in hunting and fishing because, frankly, her outdoor activity previously had been limited to sunbathing.

But now she followed me about wherever I went, somewhat doggedly, I thought.

One brisk day toward the end of October, she twisted her ankle while we were hunting in a field a quarter of a mile from our house and I had to carry her home.

I saw to it that she was comfortable in an easy chair before the fire and then buttoned my coat.

Helen's eyes narrowed. "Where are you going?"

"Just thought I'd get in a couple
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Humor In Line trina robbins

An occasional model and frequent artist, 22-year old Trina is a lively example of what the ideal female should look like and be. She specializes in "strangelings"—odd and willowy sprites and sensual gamins (curiously resembling her) who favor leaves in their hair and diaphanous gowns. For more of this charming pixy and her enchanted forest of beauty, see the next issue of **SHOWCASE**.

more hours before dark."

Helen's voice was definite. "You're not leaving this house until I can go with you."

I smiled indulgently. "There's nothing to worry about, honey. There's no traffic on the roads."

"I'm not worried about traffic."

"I won't freeze either. It's not that cold yet."

"I know damn well you won't freeze if you go out alone," she snapped.

The front door bell chimed and when I opened the door, Madge Regan and Evelyn Crandell stepped in. Evelyn was one of those late-maturers, but in another year or two, I reflected, she ought to acquire the correct proportions here and there.

Madge Regan wore an ermine coat and her ninety-seven diamond necklace. She had found it in the back room of a Chicago jewelry store and the owner had evidently been happily admiring it when he disintegrated.

She smiled slowly and her voice was a soft stroke on the cheek. "How are you, Gary?"

"Bring them in here, dear," my wife called firmly from the living room. "Naturally they came to see me too."

Madge clicked her tongue when she looked down at Helen in the easy chair. "You poor, poor dear. I see that you sprained your ankle."

Helen showed surprisingly sharp teeth. "How can you tell, professor? I have no bandage on it."

Madge kept smiling. "One of the girls happened to see you being carried into the house."

"What sharp eyes she must have," Helen said sweetly. "It could have been a sprained back, a twisted knee, or a fainting spell, but right away she knew that I'd sprained my ankle."

Evelyn Crandell was staring at me, apparently hypnotized, and she sighed.

Yes, I thought again, in just about a year or two.

"Gary," Madge Regan said. "Could you possibly drop over to our place? We're having trouble with the refrigerator."

"Darling," Helen said. "You've got about a half a dozen in that house. Don't tell me that they're all not working?"

Madge smiled tolerantly. "We simply don't know a thing about machines or electricity, dear."

Helen matched the smile. "I'll send Mr. Penrose right over."

"Well, now," Penrose said. "I don't really know too much about them things, but I'll try my best."

Madge seemed about to stop him, but then she shrugged and let him leave.

Evelyn and Madge remained another

ten minutes. When I accidentally brushed against Evelyn at the door, her eyes fluttered and for a moment I thought she was going to faint.

When I rejoined Helen, I was whistling.

"They're watching," Helen said. "I don't know for how long it's been going on, but they're watching."

"Watching? Who's watching?"

"Them," she said bitterly. "They've got an astronomy telescope trained on this house. I saw it this morning when I was upstairs making the bed. I'll bet there's always somebody on duty, even at night. That's how they knew I sprained my ankle. They were probably spying on us with that contraption when it happened."

Penrose returned fifteen minutes later. "They forgot to plug it in. Also they seemed mighty disappointed to see only me."

In the evening, I carried Helen upstairs to our bedroom and began taking off my clothes.

"Hold it," Helen commanded. "Pull down the shades first."

I went to the window. Three hundred yards away in the moonlight there was an unobstructed view to the upper storeys where Madge and the girls lived.

When I pulled down the shades I had the distinct feeling that I was disappointing someone—or more.

In the morning when I woke, Helen was sitting up in bed. She looked as though she hadn't gotten much sleep.

"We've got to leave," she said emphatically. "We should have left them in the very beginning. The very beginning."

"We can't do that, honey. They'd be helpless without a man around."

She glared at me. "We'll leave them Mr. Penrose. Just in case anything goes wrong with their refrigerator again."

"Why don't we think this over a while?" I said reasonably. "For a couple of months."

But Helen wasn't listening. "They'll be watching the house during the day, but there's no moon until eleven to-night and the telescope won't do them any good. We'll put a couple of hundred miles between them and us before daybreak. They'll never find us."

I spent the morning trying to change Helen's mind, but that proved impossible, and in the afternoon I was packing suitcases.

Penrose watched me. "I'd better come with you two," he announced after a while. "Even at my age I don't feel safe all alone with them. I'll pack my cigars and jig-saw puzzles."

I was pouring diamond rings into a zipper bag when the doorbell chimed.

Helen panicked, "Don't let them in!"

But either Penrose was near the front door and opened it or they didn't wait.

IT WAS QUITE a procession and Madge Regan was in the lead. She had a Husqvarna Super Grade bolt action .270 over one arm and the thirteen girls behind her were armed with a variety of shotguns, rifles, and .22's.

Madge's lips curled when she saw the suitcases. "Ha! So you were planning on sneaking out."

Helen glared. "Just what, may I ask, is the meaning of this? Stalking into our home, armed to the teeth?"

Madge smiled grimly. "It looks like we arrived just in time."

"This is none of your business," Helen snapped.

"And that is just where you are wrong," Madge said evenly. "The girls and I have had several meetings and we have come to a decision. It is pretty obvious that you must cooperate with us. Share and share alike." She looked at me. "Of the goods we have."

"Over my dead body," Helen said flatly.

Madge's smile had meaning. "We are prepared for that contingency, if necessary."

Doris spoke apologetically. "We don't think we're being unreasonable under the circumstances, Mrs. Tracy. After all, we are the only people in the world and your husband is the only man." She remembered Penrose. "No offense intended, Mr. Penrose."

Penrose took the wrapper off a cigar. "None taken."

"And so," Doris said. "We've got to think about our children."

Helen's eyes almost pinned me to the wall.

"I haven't left your side for a moment, dear," I said hurriedly. "If anything happened to them it was before I became the last man in the world."

Doris flushed. "Mr. Tracy, all of us girls come from the very best of homes and I assure you that we're all . . ." She searched for the right words. "Just as we were born."

"In my family," Flora Dorfner, a blonde who strained her sweater, said, "We even wait a month or two after we get married. Just to prevent talk. We haven't had a premature baby in over two hundred years."

Helen folded her arms. "Out! Everybody out!"

"You're being selfish, Mrs. Tracy," Doris said. "And that's a very bad character trait. Your husband is Adam and he has a duty."

I thought about that and caught myself nodding.

"We have decided," Doris said.

"That we ought to do this in a legal fashion. We will have a trial."

Helen's eyes widened. "A trial?"

Madge caressed the Husqvarna. "I preferred mob rule, but I was outvoted."

"We will determine," Doris said, "in a sober, intelligent, civilized manner whether you are guilty of hoarding, Mrs. Tracy. I will be the prosecuting attorney and the rest of the girls will be the jury. Miss Regan, because she is older, more mature, has been selected as the judge."

Madge Regan glanced at her sharply. "There is no need to use that condescending tone of voice, Doris. I am not yet thirty and I assure you I have many, many good years ahead of me."

Helen smiled grimly. "And I suppose you've arranged for a defense attorney?"

"Well," Doris said. "I suppose your husband could be that."

I quickly wiped the smile from my face. "Honey, I'll try my honest best. My honest best."

Helen fumed. "I refuse to go through with anything so ridiculous."

Madge tapped her rifle. "My dear,

COVER GIRL



you realize you have no choice."

And so we arranged chairs for the jury and Penrose found a gavel in the study.

DORIS PRESENTED the case for the prosecution and it was a masterful job. So well-organized, so sincere, so convincing.

As I listened to her I realized that I was — how shall we say — doomed? I was still lost in the dream of that when Doris finished.

They watched me as I tried to think of anything that could possibly be said in Helen's defense.

After about a minute of silence, Penrose got to his feet. "I just this minute thought of something. The reason we're all alive is that we were in the lead mine."

"We know that," Madge Regan said patiently. "The lead ore surrounding us protected us from the rays or whatever it was that turned everybody else into ashes."

Penrose nodded. "Well, did you ever stop to think that there are more lead mines in the United States than just one?"

The jurywomen stared at him and here and there one of them gasped.

Penrose nodded again. "There must be lots of lead mines in the country and I guess most of the miners are men. Seems logical anyway."

Doris blinked. "There must be hundreds of mines." She broke into a happy smile. "And we'll be a valuable commodity. Not a surplus."

Flora Dorfner clasped her hands ecstatically. "We'll go from lead mine to lead mine. It ought to be fun."

Madge Regan's eyes were thoughtful as she looked at me. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

"There's a mine about sixty-five miles southeast of here," Penrose said. "At Midgeville."

Doris was flushed with excitement. "I've got to get packed!"

And that, obviously, was also the thought of every one of the jurywomen as they shrieked their way through the doorway.

Madge Regan watched them go and then sighed. "Well, I suppose having a real live one to yourself is better than sharing him with fourteen others." Her green eyes looked me over. "Still, I don't think things would have been too bad."

When she was gone too, I slumped in my easy chair.

I felt depressed.

"On your feet," Helen ordered. "We've got to get the suitcases in the car and start traveling."

"What for?" I asked gloomily.

BUT FIRST, A WORD FROM OUR CONQUEROR...

THE SCENE: The White House lawn, sometime in the future. A flying saucer has just landed, and dissolved the Washington Monument. A Martian, in a spacesuit, has stepped out of the saucer, and is addressing the President. (It is obvious that he has learned English from our radio broadcasts.)

"Well, that was quite a demonstration, wasn't it??? Just another good reason why MARS is the most advanced, most aggressive conqueror, anywhere in the Solar System!

"Hi, there! This is Drykkyan, speaking to you on behalf of the planet MARS, your neighborly planetary enemy, to remind you that our one aim in life, our sole desire, is the enslavement and/or destruction of you and your property!! Remember . . . Destruction is our business . . . our only business.

"Say, are you tired of the life you've been living, but too scared of suicide, or (*chuckle*) too impatient to wait for Armageddon? Well, do yourself a favor, take the Martian 30,000 Year Tyranny Test!!!

"Yes, try our tyranny for 30,000 years, and if at the end of that time, you aren't fully subjugated, whip the remainder of your species into a frenzied revolt, and we will gladly, at no cost to your pocket or purse, annihilate you to the point of extinction, absolutely free of charge!!!

"Independent planetary tests have proven that Martian Cobalt Bombs are fast, *fast*, FAST!!! . . . and they *don't* upset your planetary orbit! They're mild, because they're filtered — for the end of your life, feel *really* clean! *Really* free of body odors!

"Hurry, hurry . . . this offer won't last forever!! Send us your unconditional surrender *today*!! Just tear off the top of your most influential leader, and send it, along with 25 slaves-in-chains, to the nearest Man-o-war in orbit around your planet.

"For your convenience, we have over 8,000 warships on duty, night and day — so don't delay. This offer expires upon destruction of your planet."

"They're going away. Every last morsel of them."

"They'll be back."

"Back? Why?"

"When they realize that we were in the mine on a Sunday."

Penrose was wedging boxes of cigars in a traveling case. "Our mine never had a Sunday shift and I guess that probably holds true for the other mines too. We're still the only people in the world."

Twenty minutes later we were in the car and on the highway.

"Faster," Helen said. "And you could look a little happier."

I forced a smile. It hurt my face.

After about four miles, Penrose spoke. "There's a car following us."

I looked in the rear view mirror. It was Madge Regan's white convertible.

"She's alone," Helen said. "Step on the gas."

"I've been thinking, dear," I said.

"You're right. Fifteen of them might be just a little strain on me."

Helen pulled a .38 Magnum revolver out of the glove compartment. "We'll shoot it out if we have to," she said grimly. "That green-eyed cat has been asking for it."

"But if we cut down the ratio," I said. "To something reasonable. Like two to one?"

"Take the next side road," Helen snapped.

"You would have someone to talk to besides me," I said brightly. "You know, feminine chit chat and all that sort of thing. You wouldn't get so lonely."

"She's gaining," Penrose said.

"A ratio of two to one is just about right," I said. "Naturally I feel sorry for the other girls, but we must be practical."

I topped a hill and what I saw almost made me go into a ditch.

A half mile ahead four Volkswagen buses were rapidly bearing down on us.

"It's the girls!" Helen breathed fiercely. "They've cut us off. But don't worry, dear, I'll save the last bullet for you."

I brought the car to a sharp stop. "It can't be the girls. None of them has a Volkswagen, much less four. This means that there must be other people in the world."

Helen cocked the hammer of the revolver. "But if they're all women I'll end the future prospects of the human race right here and now."

The Volkswagens roared toward us and almost before they screeched to a stop, the doors were flung open.

"Men!" Helen exclaimed in relief. "All men! We're saved!"

Behind us Madge jumped out of her convertible, the Husqvarna in her hand. She stopped in her tracks, blinked a few times, and then smiled. She tossed the rifle back into the car and began applying lipstick.

All of the men appeared to be in their early twenties, with the exception of one who was approximately my age.

He came forward with an outstretched hand. "Mr. Tracy, I presume? We found your note in the Bourbon department of Chicago's largest liquor store." He rubbed his hands. "You mentioned that there were fourteen . . ." Then he looked worried. "You used the word 'girls'."

"Women," I corrected. "Take my word for it. How did all of you manage to survive?"

"I'm Professor Wilson," he said. "Of the State College of Mines and this is my class. I happened to be taking them on a tour of a lead mine when all this happened."

I counted the hungry faces in front of me. "Sixteen, including you, Professor?"

He nodded. "I guess we'll just have to pull straws to see who gets who. Two of us will just have to be disappointed."

"Perhaps," I said. I was thinking of Madge Regan. "And perhaps not."

One more passenger lowered himself creakily out of the last Volkswagen.

"That's Breamer," Wilson said. "He was our guide."

Penrose brightened. "Do you happen to play checkers?"

Breamer nodded. "I'm seventy-four. You're damn right I play checkers."

We established quite a village and there were thirty-four of us in the world.

But nine months later . . . almost to the day . . . — JACK RITCHIE